

History and importance of school canteens in Benin

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Abstract

In Benin, obstacles to universal access to primary education persist. In rural areas, enrolment and attendance rates remain low due to several factors. Families living in poverty may not be able to afford to send their children to school; although the government has eliminated primary school fees, parents still have to buy school uniforms and supplies. There is also an opportunity cost associated with sending girls to school, rather than keeping them at home where they can help their mothers with household chores and look after their younger siblings (School canteens in Benin to improve student enrolment and retention, in partnership with parents' associations, 2008). This study aims to assess the importance and history of school canteens in Benin. The method used was a descriptive, analytical and longitudinal survey with a diagnostic aim, based on questionnaires and data processing. The results obtained are as follows: from 2000 to 2002, Benin had 144 schools with canteens, 1325 in 2014. In 2015- 2016, Benin reached a coverage rate of 31%, i.e. 2566 schools. In 2018- 2019, 1600 schools were added, for a total of 3179 schools (51%). In 2021, 3350 schools and 5356 schools for a coverage rate of 75% in 2022. These results highlight the key role of school canteens in student retention, and suggest the need for further investigation into the differentiated effects of school canteen types and other socio-economic factors on performance and retention. Hunger need no longer be a barrier to children's education.

Keywords: Impact, School Canteens, Performance, Pupils, Benin.

Introduction

In Benin, obstacles to universal access to primary education persist. In rural areas, enrolment and attendance rates remain low due to several factors. Families living in poverty may not be able to afford to send their children to school; although the government has eliminated primary school fees, parents still have to buy school uniforms and supplies. There is also an opportunity cost associated with sending girls to school, rather than keeping them at home where they can help their mothers with household chores and look after their younger siblings (School canteens in Benin to improve student enrolment and retention in partnership with parents' associations, 2008).

Canteens play an essential role in Benin's education system, providing nutritious meals to schoolchildren to promote their well-being and academic success. School feeding has evolved over time, and is now clearly recognized and accepted as one of the most effective ways of supporting children's enrolment and retention in school.

Indeed, in many parts of Benin, where children walk on average more than three kilometers from their villages to school, and where school attendance is hampered by the need for food and domestic chores (especially for girls), there can be no school without a canteen.

Methodology

This study consisted in collecting data in a few randomly selected schools in the various communes of the Atlantic department. Atlantique is a department located in the south of Benin. It is subdivided into eight (08) communes: Abomey-Calavi, Allada (Prefecture), Kpomassè, Ouidah, Sô-Ava, Toffo, Tori-Bossito and Zè. This was a descriptive, analytical and longitudinal survey with a diagnostic aim, using questionnaires sent to schools, teachers, parents and the pupils themselves. The questionnaires were in French, but were mostly administered in local languages. The data collection team had a good understanding of the French version of the questionnaires, as well as a good command of the local languages. The data collected were processed using statistical methods to obtain quantitative results.

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Results and discussion

The first canteens initiated by the World Food Programme (WFP) were set up in the mid-1970.

The first canteen was set up by the WFP in 1975, followed by government canteens in 2000, CRS canteens in 2002. UNICEF in 2004 and DANIDA through PASEB in 2009. We also have others such as FAST- TRACK INITIATIVE/ PME in 2010. (EASB,2015).

The involvement of the Beninese state began in 2000 with a national program implemented by the Ministry of Maternal and Primary Education (MEMPE) inspired by the Pam approach. In 2014, the Ministry set up a School Food Department (DAS) to manage the public budget allocated to canteens and ensure their monitoring and evaluation. The same year, a national school feeding policy was adopted.

In 2015, the results were deemed unsatisfactory: insufficient financial resources, complex procurement procedures, poor food management. At the same time, other actions were implemented by foreign organizations, including the American NGO Catholic Relief Service (CRS), Pam, the Common Budget Fund (CBF) and the Global Partnership for Education (PME/GPE).

In 2016, the new government launched another school feeding program. Its implementation is delegated to the WFP, whose approach is deemed the most efficient. 2017 marks a turning point with the signing of the National Integrated School Feeding Program¹ (PNASI, 2017/2021). This program is the concrete application of the National School Food Policy adopted in 2014. Once again, the government is partnering with the WFP, which is advising and implementing the program. As part of its mission, the UN organization is working with national NGOs to mobilize communities and monitor implementation of the PNASI at local level.

International NGOs such as the CRS, other UN agencies² and donors are also involved in the national school canteen program. The canteens are also monitored by the Departmental Departments of Nursery and Primary Education, which have a dedicated school food service. These structures have no decision-making power over the canteens, whose management remains centralized at State level. This is why the National Association of Benin Communes (ANCB) is currently lobbying for the decentralization of canteen management to communes or departments. The PNASI aims to eventually set up canteens in nearly 4,000 schools.

For the 2019/2020 school year; 3,234 schools were covered by a government canteen. If we take into account the canteens implemented by PAM alone, the figure rises to 3,852. This means that 642,782 schoolchildren benefit from PAM/PNASI canteens, or just over 38% of the country's schoolchildren. In the first year, PNASI canteens were installed in schools benefiting from the previous government program. For the schools subsequently selected, the criteria for their inclusion in the PNASI program were not deemed transparent.

The government is aiming for the widest possible coverage: 5386 schools will be covered by a public canteen by the 2022-2023 school year. (Benin Ministry of Maternal and Primary Education, 2022).

Of the eight thousand one hundred and sixty-nine (8,169) public elementary school in Benin in 2015-2016, only 2,566 have canteens, representing a national coverage rate of 31%. Benin had several experiences with school canteens before the advent of the PNASI. There were four types of school canteen in operation, with intervention modalities varying from one partner to another. These were the canteens supported by the Government, those implemented by the WFP, those executed with funding from the Global Partnership for Education (PME) and those implemented by CRS. (Diagnosis of the coordination mechanism of the National Integrated School Feeding Program (PNASI) in Benin; 2017).

The number of children covered has risen from 380,622 in 2017 to 1,135,350 in 2022, representing a coverage rate of 75% in 2022, compared with 30% in 2016. The government and its partner, the World Food Program, have therefore agreed to set up an appropriate legal, institutional and regulatory framework to ensure the long-term success of this relevant school feeding program. In addition, at least 75% of foodstuffs are sourced locally, and certified by the relevant authorities.

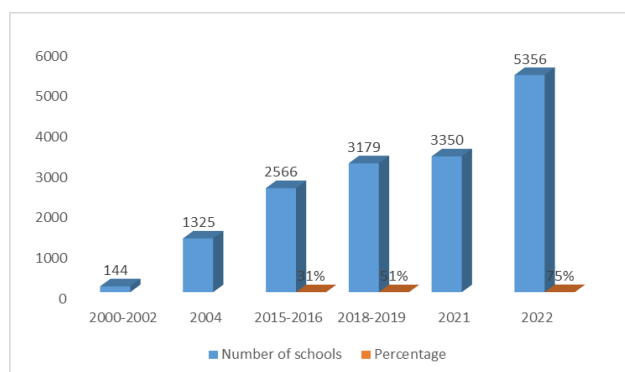


Diagram showing the evolution of canteens

The school canteen, from its genesis, was set up to encourage student attendance and help improve retention levels in schools, particularly in rural areas. School canteens ease the economic burden on parents, giving them time to pursue other activities rather than looking after their children's lunches. The nutrient content of the meals eaten ensures that children are well equipped to attend classes, especially in the afternoon.

Its impact on retention and enrolment rates has been demonstrated by principals and teachers of schools with school canteens. However, the operation of school canteens in schools is not without its difficulties. However, one school, one canteen for a sustainable, inclusive and quality education for all, by 2025.

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